



## Problems and Solutions to Professional Development of Novice College English Teachers: A Case Study on Chinese Local HEIs

KONG Yunjun<sup>[a],[b],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Doctoral School of Education, University of Szeged, Hungary.

<sup>[b]</sup>Assistant Professor, School of Foreign Languages, Chongqing Three Gorges University, Chongqing, China

\*Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

The paper aims at exploring four College English novice teachers' problems in the process of professional development, understanding their consciousness, clarifying their confusion and needs, and then trying to put forward some corresponding countermeasures. Narrative research, case study and interviews were employed to collect data from the four respondents with different backgrounds in three local colleges and universities in China. The research found that the content of novice College English teachers' professional development consists of professional knowledge, professional skills and professional affection; the process of professional development involves pre-service training, inductive education and practical growth. Then, the paper proposed some suggestions for professional development based on the facts of the individual teachers in Chinese local Higher Education Institutions (hereafter HEIs).

**Key words:** Professional development; Novice College English teachers; Chinese local HEIs

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### INTRODUCTION

By the first half of year 2016, there are about 1,200 HEIs providing degree-level programs in China, among which are 1,100 local HEIs. They account for over 91% of the total regular HEIs and constitute the most principal part of Chinese Higher Education for degree programs. With the enrollment expansion of colleges and universities, the number of local HEIs is still increasing. Compared with key universities, the local HEIs, especially the newly-built ones are generally located in prefecture level cities with disadvantageous district environment and schooling conditions, poor candidate quality and unfavorable teacher competency, which result in College English teaching low level and low efficiency for a long term. Therefore, not only the professional development of novice College English teachers in Chinese local HEIs is important, but also very urgent.

#### A. College English

College English, or public English, is an integral part of Chinese higher education. It is a compulsory basic course for the college students. According to the current cultivating system of Chinese HEIs, non-English undergraduate freshmen and sophomores are required to study College English course in four semesters of two academic years. Generally, college students should pass College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) after 2-years study, which is the basic standard. Of course, students with higher levels can pass CET-6, which is the highest standard. This is an important indicator to measure the level of College English teaching and the students' English learning in China.

#### B. Novice College English Teacher

As an important part of Chinese higher education organization, the situation of the overall team of College English teachers is unsatisfactory, with unreasonable

age structure, low educational levels, high turnover rates and weak awareness of professional development, etc. According to statistics, less than 2% of College English teachers have the doctor's degree, about 60% of them have master's degree, and 9% are pursuing doctorate (including doctoral degree programs) and master's degree (S. R. Wang & H. X. Wang, 2011). In comparison to the past, the educational structure of College English teachers has made significant progress, but there is still a big gap compared with the other academic echelon which the doctorate has already been very popular. Relatively worse is the local HEIs. Meanwhile, viewing from the title of the technical post structure, less than 29,000 are associate professors or professors; the rest 80,000 are middle or the following lower titles in nearly 110,000 English teachers (Ministry of Education, 2010), among which most are young teachers or novice teachers who have just started their career, and what is more unsatisfactory is the College English teacher team in local HEIs. The newly-graduated teachers, those who transferred from the secondary schools, and those who changed their jobs from other industries or enterprise to universities or colleges consist of the team of College English novice teachers, which indicates the particularity and complexity of the College English novice teachers in Chinese local HEIs.

### C. Professional Development

Whether teaching is a profession is under hot debate for years. Although teaching can not be termed a full-profession (Ginsburg & Megahed, 2009) right now, the idea of non-profession (Abbott, 1988) has gone forever. It is regarded as a semi-profession (Etzioni, 1964), quasi-profession or periphery profession (Stinnett, 1968). And most scholars and teachers believe that it is a formative profession, an aspiring profession. Thus, teacher's professional development has aroused more and more interests.

Teachers' professional development refers to teachers' professional growth, which is a dynamic process of constantly updating and accelerating teachers' internal professional structure and professional attributes. It involves a comprehensive development of professional knowledge, professional skills, professional spirit, and professional ideals, etc.. The research of professional development has undergone three stages in China:

(a) Concerning the result of teachers' professional development, i.e. the access to knowledge, ability and character to fulfill teaching;

(b) Emphasizing the process of teachers' professional development, i.e. teachers' lifelong learning;

(c) Focusing on the purpose of teachers' professional development of teachers, i.e. paying attention to teachers' autonomous consciousness and encouraging them to participate in social change (Zhu & Zhou, 2007).

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Currently, the Reform of College English teaching has been implementing comprehensively. College English teachers are the direct executants of the reform program of College English teaching, and they put the idea of reform into the practice of teaching. The effect of the Reform of College English Teaching and the quality of teaching depend upon College English Teachers to a great degree, because they play a key role in improving the quality of teaching as well as constructing and developing College English. Novice College English teachers, particularly, those who work in local universities as a new force of teaching are important component part of College English teaching staff, and have a great influence on the effect of the Reform of College English Teaching. It is significant to improve the whole quality of College English staff and increase the quality of College English Teaching as well as propel the Reform of College English Teaching through accelerating novice College English teachers' professional development.

The prior research mainly has dealt with the connotation, process and ways of the teacher professional development (e.g. Chen, 2013; Collinson, 2001; Cui, 2011; Lu & Zhong, 2006; Yu, 2004; Zhao, 2007; Zhu, 2014; Zhu & Zhou, 2007). In terms of the research object, novice College English teachers, especially those in local HEIs have far beyond the research attention. Some research has discussed novice English teachers' professional skills and behavior (e.g. Gilbert, 2005; Lu & Zhou, 2008; Mandel, 2006; Xu, 2013; Yu, 2007), but ignoring the variety and complexity of the novice teacher group.

In terms of the research method, most are theoretical research and analysis. Only a few researches have adopted the empirical research methods, such as survey and interview.

In terms of research perspectives, the related topic is probed mainly from the perspective of linguistics, less from the perspective of pedagogy and psychology.

On the whole, through literature review, we can find that, the trend of the research is from the concern of the teachers' professional development results to the development process, and then to the purpose of the development, which indicates that teachers' development is a process of lifelong learning, trying to realize teachers' subject value and social value. Therefore, a series of ways and methods have been constructed. As for the novice English teachers in local HEIs, they are confronted with work perplex, at the same time, there is a pressing demand for professional development at the beginning of the entry. Therefore, at this special stage, they need more attention.

## 2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Being a big country of foreign language education, a large number of novice teachers add to the College

English teaching force every year. As an important part of College English teachers, novice teachers bear the same, or even more tasks and responsibilities with experienced teachers, which largely affect College English teaching reform effectiveness. College English novice teachers are concerned more about self-adequacy and the ability to survive in the new teaching environment at the beginning of the entry. Thus, survival concerns become the theme of College English novice teachers during their professional life. However, in China, the pre-service College English teachers' preparation has been paying too much attention to "what to teach" instead of "how to teach", resulting in their pedagogical teaching competence deficiency. Besides, being not familiar with their teaching environment, materials and students often have great impact on their teaching experience. In this case, many novice teachers feel stressful and anxious, worrying about their ability to survive. Therefore, novice College English teachers' professional development is also particularly important and urgent, not only because it will determine whether they can successfully "survive", but will also decide what kind of teachers they will be in the future throughout their career. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to give ear to the novice College English teachers' developing stories, to explore their problems in the process of professional development, to understand their consciousness, to clarify their confusion and needs, and then to put forward some corresponding countermeasures.

### 3. RESEARCH PROCEDURE

#### 3.1 Participants

Four novice College English teachers with different backgrounds from three local colleges and universities were chosen as the research subjects. The participants are a male novice teacher who is a fresh graduate just in his first year of teaching, a female novice teacher who is a fresh graduate in her second year of teaching, a female novice teacher who moved to a local university from a high school, a male novice teacher who transferred from the enterprise to a local university, which make the objects of study can be representative. According to the survey and analysis, the paper concludes that the content of novice College English teachers' professional development consists of professional knowledge, professional skills and professional affection; the process of professional development involves pre-service training, inductive education and practical growth. Some suggestions are proposed for professional development based on the facts of the individual teachers in Chinese local HEIs.

#### 3.2 Methods

##### 3.2.1 Narrative Research

Narrative research refers to the researchers enter into the research field, get close to the teachers' real life

world, and try to collect more authentic and reliable materials and data to provide evidence. It relates to teachers' everyday life history, life incidents, diaries, biography, autobiography, etc.. Narrative research can be implemented by two procedures. Firstly, ontological narrative, that is noting down individual's story while they are telling. Secondly, representational narrative, that is the researchers' account of other stories, presenting explanations of psychological, social and cultural knowledge. It does not directly define College English teaching, nor direct regulation education should do, it is only in the form of education story, let the readers experience education from the story and get to know what College English teachers are doing and how they are trying.

##### 3.2.2 Case Study

This study intends to focus on four novice College English teachers in local colleges and universities in Chongqing, Guizhou and Sichuan, mainly employing observations, interviews and portfolios to track down the process of their professional development in natural context for conducting rich and detailed research. By comprehensively describing and analyzing, the typical features of their present situation and development progress can be shaped.

##### 3.2.3 Stories

###### 3.2.3.1 Story 1

Mr. D, male, 26, graduated from a university in Sichuan, Master's Degree in English, has been working for one year. As a non-normal graduate, he didn't study pedagogy, psychology and teaching methodology systematically before. He learned a little in the pre-service training when attended short-term training courses and learning.

Because my major is English linguistics at the graduate school, I have not learned pedagogy, psychology, so I'm not familiar with the knowledge of teaching method. When I started the first semester classes, I always tried to imitate my former teachers, including the processes of lectures, classroom expression, even the ways of questioning. I always worried about the class, worried that the students could not trust and accept me. I didn't have enough confidence in classroom teaching. So I always spent a lot of time preparing, elaborating the content of the class, trying to make all kinds of class arrangements, hoping to be able to successfully complete the teaching task, and then increasing the confidence and security in class. At the beginning, I also encountered many problems in writing lesson plans. I was gradually familiar with them after reading a lot of books about English teaching, and consulting the experienced teachers. In addition, I took the initiative to seek advice from several senior outstanding teachers, and repeatedly observed their classes. I have learned a lot and my classroom arrangement, teaching skills are more flexible now.

As a novice English teacher, I hope I can improve in all respects, especially in English teaching skills. But now I am overwhelmed with confusion, and don't know exactly where to start. In terms of myself, I feel I have a narrow scope of knowledge, and I lack of interdisciplinary knowledge with insufficient motive force.

I have some good wishes but lack of experiences, unable to do what I want to do. In terms of other aspects, as a new teacher, I'm overwhelmed with teaching tasks. There are very few opportunities to attend some education and training programs. Besides, I just worked for only one year with relatively low income. As you know, now the level of consumption is very high and we new teachers are called "the moonlight clan". Namely, we wipe out wages every month, no balance. Life is really difficult. Therefore, my professional growth is subject to the constraints in different degrees, to a large extent hindered my professional development.

### 3.2.3.2 Story 2

Miss C, female, 27, graduated from a normal university with a Master's Degree, majoring in English instruction, and has been working for 2 years. Miss C has gained excellent academic record. She has a perfect mastery of English, and she was successfully employed as an English teacher at a local undergraduate college in Chongqing after graduation. She graduated from a normal university, and attended some teaching practice, accumulating certain practical teaching experiences. She is taking charge of four classes and she has 16 hours of English teaching a week. Miss C relatively adapted quickly, and can do the classroom teaching well.

I graduated from a normal university. We studied some courses related to teaching, such as writing lesson plans, organizing classroom activities, classroom management, etc. I can remember when the teachers give us some specific events, let us analyze and give the solutions. I know each class has different purposes, because when writing the lesson plan, there are not only the teaching objectives, but also the education purposes. We can know the teaching objectives mainly from the teaching reference books, coupled with my own understanding of the teaching material, but the education purposes are defined by the nation. As for teaching, I have different orientation. I am not the traditional type of teacher, but a friend. So I don't usurp the role of knowledge to reassure, but I am willing to learn and make progress with students together. So I think the most important thing is to establish a democratic and equal relationship between teachers and students, to create a harmonious classroom atmosphere, to promote the equal dialogue and emphasize the interaction between teachers and students, and then effective teaching and learning can put into effect in the interaction. I like to talk to students and students are willing to communicate with me too. Maybe because I am easy-going, just like their older sister, they will not feel pressed and discomfort. So there always exists relaxed and democratic atmosphere in the classroom, and I feel it is good.

For me, the teaching platform is my stage. I can show myself at this stage, get self-fulfillment and achievement, and lead the students to gain knowledge and progress. I love this stage; therefore, I would spare no effort to deduce new highlights. The support of the external environment for new teacher's professional ability and professional development is indispensable, such as wages, the relationships between colleagues, teachers' social status, etc. But I think teachers' continuous efforts are more significant, because the internal cause is the fundamental. Only have the consciousness of self-development and motivation, new teachers can consciously take on the primary responsibility of professional development and constantly improve their teaching abilities by ongoing learning, practice, reflection and exploration."

### 3.3.3.3 Story 3

Miss R, male, 40, Bachelor's Degree in English teaching, has been working for 16 years.

She has been engaged in English teaching in a senior high school for 13 years. She is good at teaching, and her students have outstanding achievement, so she has gained recognition and rewards for many times. But the heavy burden made her feel exhausted both physically and mentally, and she thought she was already in her career paracmasis. She wanted to have a change. So she transferred to a local undergraduate college in Chongqing. Because of many years' teaching in middle schools, she has very rich teaching experiences, so she can easily grasp the classroom teaching, and quickly integrated into College English teaching. Miss R has 12 lessons a week now. She feels less pressed and relaxed, which enhanced her quick transition from a middle school English teacher to a College English teacher.

Because I have worked in middle schools for many years, the level of my target students is relatively low, I teach them some basic and simple English. Now, I am aging, my memory declines year by year, but the time and society develop so fast, knowledge updates so quickly as well, I feel College English course is much more difficult than high school English and my knowledge is somewhat out of date. In addition, the college students know a lot, some have exceptional performance, some are good at computers. I felt like I am a bit "OUT". I still have to continue to study, or I couldn't keep up with them. In my point of view, I will not only study College English teaching method, but also try to strengthen my theoretical accomplishment, acquire new knowledge, and further update my knowledge structure.

Since I transferred to the university, I rarely have the opportunity to participate in professional training or study, nor attended the university teachers' pre-service training. I mainly involved in the summer College English teaching seminar held by FLTRP (foreign language teaching and research press), but it only lasted 3 days with a very big class, more than 100 teachers. Keynotes, special reports and class demonstrations were presented. It is of great benefits for seeing the experts' profound knowledge and good teachers' advantages. I really hope I can have the opportunity to go further study, meet more colleagues to improve my own professional competence.

### 3.2.3.4 Story 4

Mr. Z, male, 43, graduated from a famous university, Bachelor's Degree in English, being a translator in a large state-owned enterprise for over 10 years, once visited some European countries and the United Nations.

Mr. Z has abundant knowledge, broad vision, and proficient oral and written language. His English professional ability is very strong, with rich English working experiences. As time goes by, he wanted to start another kind of stability and quiet life to take care of his family better. So, he is employed by a local college in Guizhou province, teaching College English and concurrently teaching translation course for English majors.



Perhaps because I have been engaged in translation for all these years, I subconsciously wanted to translate the teaching contents to the students and my teaching completely became a translation lesson at the beginning. I felt distressful and I found that was not College English teaching. I think, on the one hand, this is related to my former experience; on the other hand, it is due to the lack of theoretical education knowledge and practical teaching experience. I don't know what teaching is, and I don't fully grasp the requirements of College English teaching. Later, I take the initiative to consult the experienced teachers, attend their classes, discuss with colleagues, solicit opinions from the students. Then, I get to know big differences exist between College English teaching and the translation work. So, I gradually access to the role, get familiar with every link of College English teaching, and master the regular pattern of College English teaching step by step. Now, after three years teaching, I feel it is very good, it is the most satisfactory teaching stage, and I'm falling in love with this job. In class, I can arouse students' interests and enthusiasm. Teaching and learning are thus becoming pleasant. I also get well along with my colleagues.

After entering the university, I have participated in the new teachers meeting, training, guidance support activities organized by the school of foreign languages and the university. The various activities aim at helping the new teachers integrate into the new collective and complete the role transformation to adapt to work as soon as possible. In these activities, for me, the biggest help belongs to the teaching guidance conducted by my mentor teacher. She is very rich in teaching experiences, and she is also very friendly. She always carefully explains how to design and carry out teaching, etc.. With her help, I quickly get a systematic understanding of the process of College English teaching. I am continually increasing the phronesis and my teaching has won the acceptance of students and colleagues.

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## 4. RESULTS

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From the above study, we can see that the novice teachers are trying to adjust their roles and integration in the teaching. Classroom teaching is especially important in teachers' growth and it represents teachers' whole value. Many research has reached a consensus that teachers' development, teachers identity and teachers professional pride are closely linked to the change process of classroom teaching and they can influence each other vice versa (Geng, 2014). Every teacher has his or her own understanding of college English teaching and they work hard to construct their professional identity. At the same time, the development of teaching and academic ability, and the support from other teachers are of great helpful for novice college English teachers to deal with "reality shock", thus forming a positive and stable career identity (Tang, 2015). Teachers' professional identity is always between construction and reconstruction during the process. It is this continuous change that contributes to the teachers' professional development.

It is concluded that the key of teachers' professional development is to improve their professional quality, which involves teachers' professional knowledge,

professional skills and professional affection. Therefore, the content of novice College English teachers' professional development consists of professional knowledge, professional skills and professional affection. The process of professional development includes pre-service training, inductive education and practical growth. Novice College English teachers are trying to consolidate the three contents in the three stages to achieve professional development. As a result, from the perspective of teachers' knowledge management, some suggestions could be proposed for professional development based on the aspects of the individual teacher and the university.

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## 5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSIONS

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### (a) The aspect of the individual teacher

A qualified College English teacher is supposed to possess solid teaching skills, such as a clear teaching objective; teaching activity organization; professional basic skills, including proficient written and spoken English skills, strong knowledge of English language and its use, broad knowledge horizon; And, of course, the understanding of students, be good at adjusting the teaching according to the requirements of students, cultivate the students' learning ability and guide the students in learning methods, and so on. How can they achieve these? That is to say, novice teachers must continue to study and bear life-long learning in mind. Teacher learning has become a hot topic in foreign language teacher research (Cui, 2013). Novice teachers should devote more time to learning methods and learning process so that they will take the responsibility of professional development actively and initiatively.

Teachers' individual professional beliefs or professional ideal are the main reason for improving their professional ability. Some teachers take teaching just as a job to support their families, some regard it as their own interests, and others take it as their worldly ideal and struggle it for the whole life. As a teacher, we have the accountability to be responsible for the students. Only with high ideals and professional ethics, we can devote to our development, and students can be instructive.

### (b) The aspect of the university

University is the powerful backup for teachers' professional development. Given the short pre-service training time and weak pertinence, the training target should be established based on the actual teaching staff situation of different universities and their characteristics and needs. Different disciplinary teachers should follow different training programs, and the ways of training call for changing too. Only if novice College English teachers can truly improve educational theory, teaching methods,

development consciousness, scientific and cultural qualities, so that they can meet the new challenges of higher education institution.

The related functional departments, especially the leadership of foreign language departments should encourage and help novice teachers to make practical professional development plan as soon as possible, for example, ask the teachers to identify their current position, objectively analyze their abilities, interests, needs and other personal factors; define their strengths and weaknesses, and diagnose problems; look for their best professional development direction, and set a clear development goal. In particular, novice teachers should be supported in further improving their academic degree, participating in continuing education and training, declaring and taking part in research projects, guiding the students learning and competition. Besides, establishing incentives to mobilize the enthusiasm of teachers, including reducing mentor teachers' teaching work, so that they have sufficient time and energy to do a good job of guiding; giving priority in the pay and reward, title evaluation, salary promotion and professional learning are also helpful.

Professional community has been greatly valued these years. In the professional community, cooperation dialogue between the teacher individuals and the spirit of symbiosis is booming. Every teacher in the community can grow up with the power of others, and novice teachers won't feel lonely and their individual inter-subjectivity can be fully manifested. In collaboration with the teaching research and teaching practice, the experienced and novice teachers can organize seminars, workshops and forums to conduct collective lesson preparation, classroom observation, teaching case analysis, class reflection, class demonstration and so on, which can highlight the comprehensive development of the teacher group.

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